How did psychology develop?

While the psychology of today reflects the discipline’s rich and varied history, the origins of psychology differ significantly from contemporary conceptions of the field. In order to gain a full understanding of psychology, you need to spend some time exploring its history and origins. How did psychology originate? When did it begin? Who were the people responsible for establishing psychology as a separate science?



Philosophers such as Rene Descartes (above) played an important role in the history of psychology.

**Questions in Psychology**

From its earliest beginnings, psychology has been faced with a number of different questions. The initial question of how to define psychology helped establish it as a science separate from physiology and philosophy. Additional questions that psychologists have faced throughout history include:

* What topics and issues should psychology be concerned with?
* What research methods should be used to study psychology?
* Should psychologists use research to influence public policy, education, and other aspects of human behavior?
* Is psychology really a science?
* Should psychology focus on observable behaviors, or on internal mental processes?

**The Beginnings of Psychology: Philosophy and Physiology**

While psychology did not emerge as a separate discipline until the late 1800s, its earliest history can be traced back to the time of the early Greeks. During the 17th-century, the French philosopher Rene Descartes introduced the idea of dualism, which asserted that the mind and body were two separate entities that interact to form the human experience. Many other issues still debated by psychologists today, such as the relative contributions of nature vs. nurture, are rooted in these early philosophical traditions.   
  
So what makes psychology different from philosophy? While early philosophers relied on methods such as observation and logic, today’s psychologists utilize scientific methodologies to study and draw conclusions about human thought and behavior. Physiology also contributed to psychology’s eventual emergence as a scientific discipline. Early physiology research on brain and behavior had a dramatic impact on psychology, ultimately contributing to the application of scientific methodologies to the study of human thought and behavior.

**Psychology Emerges as a Separate Discipline**

During the mid-1800s, a German physiologist named [Wilhelm Wundt](http://psychology.about.com/od/profilesofmajorthinkers/p/wundtprofile.htm) was using scientific research methods to investigate reaction times. His book published in 1874, *Principles of Physiological Psychology*, outlined many of the major connections between the science of physiology and the study of human thought and behavior. He later opened the first world’s first psychology lab in 1879 at the University of Leipzig. This event is generally considered the official start of psychology as a separate and distinct scientific discipline.   
  
How did Wundt view psychology? He perceived the subject as the study of human consciousness and sought to apply experimental methods to studying internal mental processes. While his use of a process known as *introspection* is seen as unreliable and unscientific today, his early work in psychology helped set the stage for future experimental methods. An estimated 17,000 students attended Wundt’s psychology lectures, and hundreds more pursued degrees in psychology and studied in his psychology lab. While his influence dwindled in the years to come, his impact on psychology is unquestionable.

**Structuralism Becomes Psychology’s First School of Thought**

Edward B. Titchener, one of Wundt’s most famous students, would go on to found psychology’s first major school of thought. According to the structuralists, human consciousness could be broken down into much smaller parts. Using a process known as introspection, trained subjects would attempt to break down their responses and reactions to the most basic sensation and perceptions.   
  
While structuralism is notable for its emphasis on scientific research, its methods were unreliable, limiting, and subjective. When Titchener died in 1927, structuralism essentially died with him.

**The Functionalism of William James**

Psychology flourished in American during the mid- to late-1800s. [William James](http://psychology.about.com/od/profilesofmajorthinkers/p/jamesbio.htm) emerged as one of the major American psychologists during this period and the publication of his classic textbook, *The Principles of Psychology*, established him as the father of American psychology. His book soon became the standard text in psychology and his ideas eventually served as the basis for a new school of thought known as functionalism.   
  
The focus of functionalism was on how behavior actually works to help people live in their environment. Functionalists utilized methods such as direct observation. While both of these early schools of thought emphasized human consciousness, their conceptions of it were significantly different. While the structuralists sought to break down mental processes into their smallest parts, the functionalists believed that consciousness existed as a more continuous and changing process. While functionalism is no longer a separate school of thought, it would go on to influence later psychologists and theories of human thought and behavior.

Up to this point, early psychology stressed conscious human experience. An Austrian physician named [Sigmund Freud](http://psychology.about.com/od/profilesofmajorthinkers/p/freudprofile.htm) changed the face of psychology in a dramatic way, proposing a theory of personality that emphasized the importance of the unconscious mind. Freud’s clinical work with patients suffering from hysteria and other ailments led him to believe that early childhood experiences and unconscious impulses contributed to the development of adult personality and behavior.   
  
In his book *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud detailed how these unconscious thoughts and impulses are expressed, often through slips of the tongue and dreams. According to Freud, psychological disorders are the result of these unconscious conflicts becoming extreme or unbalanced. The psychoanalytic theory proposed by Sigmund Freud had a tremendous impact on 20th-century thought, influencing the mental health field as well as other areas including art, literature, and popular culture. While many of his ideas are viewed with skepticism today, his influence on psychology is undeniable.

Psychology changed dramatically during the early 20th-century as another school of thought known as [behaviorism](http://psychology.about.com/od/behavioralpsychology/f/behaviorism.htm) rose to dominance. Behaviorism was a major change from previous theoretical perspectives, rejecting the emphasis on both the conscious and unconscious mind. Instead, behaviorism strove to make psychology a more scientific discipline by focusing purely on observable behavior.   
  
Behaviorism had its earliest start with the work of a Russian physiologist named [Ivan Pavlov](http://psychology.about.com/od/profilesofmajorthinkers/p/pavlov.htm). Pavlov's research on the digestive systems of dogs led to his discovery of the [classical conditioning](http://psychology.about.com/od/behavioralpsychology/a/classcond.htm) process, which demonstrated that behaviors could be learned via conditioned associations. Pavlov demonstrated that this learning process could be used to make and association between and environmental stimulus and a naturally occurring stimulus.



An American psychologist named [John B. Watson](http://psychology.about.com/od/profilesofmajorthinkers/p/watson.htm) soon became one of the strongest advocates of behaviorism. Initially outlining the basics principles of this new school of thought in his 1913 paper *Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It*, Watson later went on to offer a definition in his classic book *Behaviorism* (1924), writing:

"Behaviorism...holds that the subject matter of human psychology *is the behavior of the human being.* Behaviorism claims that consciousness is neither a definite nor a usable concept. The behaviorist, who has been trained always as an experimentalist, holds, further, that belief in the existence of consciousness goes back to the ancient days of superstition and magic."

The impact of behaviorism was enormous, and this school of thought continued to dominate for the next 50 years. Psychologist [B.F. Skinner](http://psychology.about.com/od/profilesofmajorthinkers/p/bio_skinner.htm) furthered the behaviorist perspective with his concept of [operant conditioning](http://psychology.about.com/od/behavioralpsychology/a/introopcond.htm), which demonstrated the effect of punishment and reinforcement on behavior.   
  
While behaviorism eventually lost its hold on psychology, the basic principles of behavioral psychology are still widely in use today. Therapeutic techniques such as behavioral modification and token economies are often utilized to help children learn new skills and overcome maladaptive behaviors, while conditioning is used in many situations ranging from parenting to education.

While the first half of the twentieth-century was dominated by psychoanalysis and behaviorism, a new school of thought known as [humanistic psychology](http://psychology.about.com/od/historyofpsychology/a/hist_humanistic.htm) emerged during the second half of the century. Often referred to as the “third force” in psychology, this theoretical perspective emphasized conscious experiences.

As you have seen in this brief overview of psychology’s history, this discipline has seen dramatic growth and change since its official beginnings in Wundt’s lab. The story certainly does not end here. Psychology has continued to evolve since 1960 and new ideas and perspectives have been introduced. Recent research in psychology looks at many aspects of the human experience, from the biological influences on behavior to the impact of social and cultural factors.   
  
Today, the majority of psychologists do not identify themselves with a single school of thought. Instead, they often focus on a particular specialty area or perspective, often drawing on ideas from a range of theoretical backgrounds. This eclectic approach has contributed new ideas and theories that will continue to shape psychology for years to come.